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CONGRESS AND PARLIAMENT: A CONTRAST.

BY SYDNEY BROOKS.

AN Englishman who listened too guilelessly to the counsels of his friends in New York would never visit Congress at all. For the cultivated Easterner it seems to be part of the spice of life to run down the national legislature and scare strangers away from the enjoyment of it with gibes on its manners, intelligence and general tone; and anyone who has not been long enough in America to know that New York is its most provincial city and rarely sees beyond the Palisades, may quite easily be taken in. In this case, however, New York is more or less in line with the rest of the country. One finds its attitude of humorous contempt reproduced in almost all the States, under milder forms and from different causes, but with equal insincerity. I know of nothing more delightful in its way than the incontinent sigh of relief sent up from all parts of the United States when Congress adjourns. Hardly more flattering are the greetings which herald in the opening of a new session. "Congress will meet," I read in a Texas paper the other day, "and it will pass laws which the members hope will send each of them back to Congress. Among the members will be those who will object on the supposition that their constituents will send them back to Congress for objecting. That is about all there is to it. As the poor man is greater in numbers than the rich man, the poor man will come in for more consideration than the rich man; but all in all it is a play from the beginning of Congress to the end of it for each member to get back and draw his salary." There may, for all I know, be something in the local conditions of Galveston to give point to this outburst of acrid Asiatic mirth; but I rather suspect it of being just the expression, somewhat franker than is usual, of that merry and imperturbable cynicism which, mingling oddly with the altruism of

the race, colors the American view of politics and politicians. I was advised, if I still wished to keep my faith whole in the American brand of democracy, not to go near Washington. I was told that I should only be disappointed, that the heroic days of Congress had passed, that the great men and the great orators were gone—Tom Reed was the last of them, said everyone—and lawyers who lived on politics, and queer people from the West, and saloonkeepers who called themselves “salesmen” in the official Directory, made up the bulk of the House now-a-days.

It wanted at least the courage of one's incredulity to persevere against such forebodings. But the reward in sheer human interest was just as great as I had hoped for. Nothing in America is quite so American as Congress, and it was the notion of spying out upon legislative Americanisms and comparing these with what I knew of the personnel and customs of the House of Commons that chiefly took me to Washington. I did not expect to find much ceremonial dignity in the House or Senate, and should indeed have been disappointed if, instead of the bare, business-like proceedings I actually watched, there had been some characterless imitation of European pomp. Nor did I look for the presence of great men or great orators, knowing that by the theory of American politics, a national legislature should be composed not of the wisest or most solid or most experienced men in the country, but simply of one's next-door neighbor, the average citizen; knowing, too, that the committee system has virtually stifled Congress as an effective organ of debate. What I hoped to come across was the distinctive flavor of America showing itself in the smaller details of Congressional manners, bearing and procedure; and in this I was in **no way** disappointed.

Nevertheless, as I sat in the gallery just above the Speaker's chair and watched the Fifty-sixth Congress assembling for its opening day's work, it came upon me with a sort of shock that of all those three hundred and seventy legislators who were crowding the floor and gangways below me, there were barely half a dozen whom I knew even by name, and not one whom a stranger would inevitably ask to have pointed out to him. In the Senate it was different. At least a score of the members of the Upper House were men with whose careers and personalities even a casual follower of American politics could not help being familiar, and whom one was anxious to have identified. But in the House

I felt as lost as an average New Yorker would feel if you suddenly asked him to name, say, four of the thirty-four Congressmen who represent his State at Washington. And when I inquired after the real notabilities of the House, I was directed to one gentleman who had achieved fame by refusing, as I understood the matter, to wear a dress suit at the White House, and to another with the more pronounced distinction of possessing three wives. One tired after a while of studying even the heroes of these exploits, and I readily fell in with the tactful suggestion that the House was perhaps more interesting *en bloc*, than in its individual members.

The opening of a new session and the manner of choosing its presiding officer show with some accuracy how far an assembly is moved by respect for forms and usages. In England the ceremony, if not always dignified, has a certain picturesque absurdity. The Queen for some years past has given up the practice of opening Parliament in person and handed over the duty to a Royal Commission. The Commissioners in all the grace of cocked hats, scarlet and ermine robes seat themselves on a bench between the throne and the woosack in the House of Lords. A messenger is sent to the House of Commons summoning them to hear the Royal Proclamation. The messenger is an elaborately dressed official in black silk knee-breeches and the coat and ruffles of other days. "Black Rod" is his title. The door-keeper of the House seeing him approach immediately bars the door, to emphasize the fact that the Sovereign, who is supposed to be present in the person of Black Rod, has no constitutional right to demand admission to the House. Black Rod knocks three times and is allowed to enter. The door-keeper announces his arrival, and at the word all business in the House is suspended and members uncover as Black Rod advances toward the Speaker's chair, bowing thrice. The message is delivered and such members of the House as care to go—there is not room for many—follow the Chief Clerk to the bar of the Lords. The Royal Commission is read and the Commons directed to return whence they came and elect a Speaker for Her Majesty's consideration. The faithful Commons reassemble in their hall and a prearranged programme is gone through. The Chief Clerk points three fingers at the member selected to propose the Speaker, who rises and briefly nominates the man agreed upon. The Chief Clerk points again at the seconder, whose speech is equally short. The motion is put and, if there is no opposition,

and there rarely is, declared carried. The proposer and seconder escort the Speaker-elect to the chair and the House rises as its presiding officer, standing under the canopy of the chair, with one foot on the dais and the other on the topmost step leading to it, returns thanks for the honor done him. The Sergeant-at-Arms puts the mace on the table and the Leader of the House offers his congratulations, before an adjournment is made till twelve o'clock.

The ceremony is not yet quite complete. The Speaker-elect has still to receive the Queen's approval, and his chrysalis state is marked by his appearance at noon in ordinary court dress, instead of the full-bosomed wig and flowing robe that grace the perfected Speaker. Once more Black Rod summons the Commons to the Lords, there to be greeted by the Lord Chancellor and four other Lords in their robes of state. The Speaker-elect "presents himself with all humility for Her Majesty's gracious approbation." The Lord Chancellor announces that "Her Majesty does most readily approve and confirm you as their Speaker." The Speaker then makes the time-honored claim for access at all times to Her Majesty, liberty of speech in debate and freedom from arrest. A few minutes later he reappears in the House of Commons, heralded through the lobbies by official cries of "Mr. Speaker"—a cry which brings every hat off its wearer's head—and takes the chair, a duly confirmed Speaker. The business of swearing-in members is set about forthwith. The members bring with them certificates of election and hand them to the Chief Clerk. The oath is administered in batches of four or five—by the Clerk, not, as in Congress, by the Speaker—and each man after repeating it, kisses the Bible, signs the roll of Parliament and passes on to shake hands with the Speaker, becoming from that moment an indisputable M. P. It is a wearisome, unsystematic proceeding, compared with the swift dispatch of the same ceremony in Congress, and often lasts over into the second or third day of the session.

There is another function, thoroughly English in its genesis and execution, which never fails to precede by a few hours the ceremonial opening of Parliament. That is the search through the vaults of the two Houses for any would-be assassins and other maliciously disposed persons who may be lurking there. The Lord Chamberlain, one of the highest of English dignitaries, the Deputy Sergeant-at-Arms, an inspector of police, the Clerk of the Works, and four of Her Majesty's Guard of Yeomen—the latter

armed to the teeth and carrying lanterns—march solemnly through the waste of vaults, peering into every alcove and man-hole, seeking what they may find. Nothing of course ever is found, but something was found three hundred odd years ago—Guy Fawkes and his brother conspirators with their barrels of gunpowder, preparing a surprise for James I. Since then no Parliament has thought of beginning its deliberations without a rigid inspection of its underground cellars. The ceremony is gone through before each session with all possible gravity and punctiliousness. In one particular only has the ritual been changed. In the old days when the report had been received at the Lord Chamberlain's office, a horseman dashed off to Windsor or Whitehall with the assurance that the Sovereign's safety would not be endangered if Parliament were opened in person. Now the good news is sent to the Queen by telegraph.

These things may be ridiculous in themselves, but they stand for a good deal that is worth preserving. It is the absence of such usages, with their air of stateliness and ancients, the bonds they lay upon a man to live up to the dignity of old traditions, that makes the atmospheric differences of Congress and Parliament. At the Capitol the note of unmitigated modernity is struck on the very threshold. Any one can enter who cares to, without reference to age, color or sex, present condition of clothing or previous condition of servitude. No one is on guard at the doors to inquire after your business or challenge your right to admission. Millionaire or tramp, white or black, the Capitol is yours to roam in at will, and if you can find a vacant seat in the public galleries from which to listen to the debates, you are welcome to it. No tickets, passes or credentials of any sort are asked for; you just walk straight in and sit down. Liberty can go no further. It seemed to me eminently consonant with all I had seen of America that this should be so; and if one's English notions were occasionally startled by the sight of some ragged shuffle of a man, whom no second-rate hotel would have allowed to enter its lobby, lounging about in the precincts of the national legislature, there was the feeling that his presence was more than compensated for by the system that made it possible.

Something of this infectious unrestraint had passed into the House itself, and the floor and galleries gave evidence of it. The galleries were in a particularly democratic mood. They hummed

with chat and comment—three-fourths of the occupants were women—and whenever anything on the floor seemed to strike their fancy they joined in the laughter and applause unchecked. The new Speaker received as hearty a round of hand-clapping and handkerchief-waving from the galleries as could be wished for; and there were moments in the Roberts debate when feminine sentiment on the general question of a man's owning three wives got beyond the point of passivity. The disposition of the onlookers, so far as I could gauge it, was not in the least toward reverence of the House, its members or its ways of doing things, nor yet toward irreverence—rather was it that of play-goers in a theatre, one of curiosity and pleasurable expectation—and there were several things on the floor to encourage this sense of *camaraderie* and make every one feel quite at home. As viewed from behind the Speaker's chair, the House cannot honestly be called impressive. Honorable members are seated not as in the House of Commons, along parallel lines of benches, but in curved, concentric rows, facing the Speaker. Each member has a revolving arm-chair with a spacious desk in front of it, where he can write letters and busy himself among his papers in a way that must be horribly disconcerting to an opponent in debate. Behind the chairs runs a railing hung with drapery, and between the railing and the wall is a passageway opening on to smoking-rooms, where members by simply leaving the door open, can enjoy their cigar and listen to the speeches and propagate throughout the House a pleasing odor of tobacco. Further to the right is a barber's shop, through the glass doors of which it was possible from where I sat to catch a glimpse of members under the razor. When business was dull the colored barber did not disdain to open one of the doors and, standing half in and half out of his shop, watch the proceedings of the House till they bored him.

An even more home-like feeling was encouraged by the sight of several small boys, the sons of Congressmen, sitting on their father's knees during the debates. The colored member, I was glad to see, brought his little piccaninny along. Some of these infants, tiring of the paternal lap, would climb into the nearest seat, and there explore and test to the uttermost its rotary mechanism; and the Congressman to whom the seat belonged—brimming over as all Americans are with absolute kindness toward children—would make no effort to expel the intruder, but

walk off into the smoking-room for a cigar. One urchin, I noticed, came up with his father to be sworn in, held up his little fist and took the oath of allegiance to the Constitution. Nothing in Congress fascinated me quite so much as this, except perhaps the exquisitely condescending manner in which the pages of the House led the applause at the finish of the new Speaker's address—giving him just that "friendly support" for which he had appealed to the House. These pages are a feature peculiar to Congress. In the House of Commons no one but members, the clerks at the table and the Sergeant-at-Arms is allowed to cross the bar. Messages and telegrams are handed to the nearest member and passed along the benches until they reach the member for whom they are meant. The habit of using the House as a writing room—a habit impossible in the House of Commons, where there are no desks, and forbidden anyway—makes a corps of messenger boys an obvious corollary. A member who wants a letter mailed or a message taken to a friend in the Senate, or a book fetched from the library, claps his hands as a signal, and three or four pages dart along the gangways to his seat, in eager emulation to run his errands. How much of the noise and seeming disorder of Congress is due to the banging of desk-lids and the summoning of these messenger boys, it would be hard to say. I should hazard about three-fourths.

In personal appearance Congress struck me as falling short of the high average maintained by the House of Commons, which, taken as a whole, is probably the best-dressed assembly in the world. The House of Representatives faithfully reflects the ordinary American man's carelessness of externals. I observed very closely, but could only find two members who came up to the Fifth Avenue standard; and it takes an exceptionally built man to look imposing in the ordinary Congressional costume of loose frock-coat, low cut vest, a turned-down collar with a white bow, and a derby hat. In the Senate more attention seems to be paid to these details of deportment and manners. I saw no member of the Upper House enjoying the luxury of what is known as a "dry smoke," whereas I counted at one time not less than thirteen Congressmen chewing cigars in unrestrained comfort. Nor while in the Senate had I any reason to wish, as I often had in the House of Representatives, that the New York Board of Health regulations relative to the use of the floors of cable cars and elevated trains, might be extended to the Capitol. These are small things,

but they indicate a certain laxity which no public assembly can long afford to leave unrebuked. I noticed, for instance, in the House perpetual violations of the law which forbids a man to pass between the Speaker and the member who is addressing the House. The House of Commons is punctilious to what some think an absurd degree in the observance of such points of order. If a member moves about the House with his hat on or puts even a toe beyond the line on the floor which no man may cross while speaking, cries of "Order! Order!" are heard on every side. And this is very wholesome. It may seem trivial in a given solitary instance, but it is only by ceaseless stringency in the small points of decorum that the intimacies of daily strife in a contentious and excitable body can be kept on a high plane.

I was told that as a rule the House is a disheartening place to speak in, and I could easily imagine it to be so. At the beginning of a session, when members are keen in their work, and before the novelty has worn off, I had little chance of judging what it would be like later on. But there are some obvious disadvantages in its structure and the habits of its members which must chill the most earnest orator. The House, to begin with, is an enormous hall, far larger than the House of Commons, which though it contains six hundred and seventy members, has sitting accommodation for only about three hundred. It would take a powerful voice to fill it, even if the completest silence were enforced, but one cannot be in the House long without getting the impression that even comparative quiet is hard to come at. The buzz in the galleries, the calling for the pages, who scurry up and down the aisles at top speed, the clatter of the desks and the repeated thumps of the Speaker's gavel, make up a fretful and ceaseless clamor which even the strongest lungs would contend against in vain. If it is true, as I heard charged, that Congressional oratory is tinged with extravagance, the explanation lies to hand. No man can argue at the top of his voice. A speaker who has to strain his larynx to make himself heard is certain to strain his phrases. A good deal of the effectiveness of the House of Commons as a debating organ is due to the fact that members of the two parties sit opposite to one another and within easy range. Moreover, the presence of desks and the habits they encourage are serious handicaps on the orator who desires the attention of the whole House. You cannot thunder successfully at an honorable gentleman who

is too busily engaged lolling in his seat or writing a letter, or reading a newspaper to turn round and look at you.

During the debates on the Roberts case I saw little of the state of things which I was given to understand was the ordinary condition of the House in mid-session. Members were keenly interested and gave a quiet and courteous hearing to all that was said. The speeches struck me as being rather above the level of average addresses heard in the House of Commons. They were well formed, in style and matter, and well delivered. Mr. Roberts, considering that he was speaking for the first time in a strange hall, and with the chilling sense of having three-quarters of the House against him, did remarkably well. But the interest of Congress is only half contained in the Capitol, and the visitor who wishes to see the real machinery of politics at work must make the round of the Washington hotel lobbies. It was my good fortune to be staying at the same hotel with several famous bosses, powerful beyond the dreams of Kaiser or Czar, and among them one whom I venture to call the Greatest Boss of All. Very fascinating it was to watch the great man pass from the dining-room to the lobby with his tall hat well on the back of his head, a toothpick in one corner of his mouth and an unlighted cigar in the other, settle himself comfortably in an armchair and there hold a levee of politicians and office-seekers from all over the country. Men did deference unto him as to power personified, and all the little boys in the neighborhood who had been told that if they behaved well they too might grow up to be great bosses and govern millions from the security of a hotel lobby, stood round the walls and gaped at the monarch on his throne. Nothing could be more austere democratic. And accidentally as I passed behind the Great Man's chair I heard some one remark, "He don't like it. I was there when he said it." "Was you?" asked the Great Man.

And so, leaving Republicanism to flourish as it pleased in Washington, I returned with many mingled feelings to the absolute despotism of New York.

SYDNEY BROOKS.